

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
GENERAL SECTION  
MILITARY HISTORY COMMITTEE  
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED OFFICERS COURSE  
1946-1947

THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY G, 2D INFANTRY (5TH INF. DIV.)  
IN THE REDUCTION OF FORTRESS METZ, 6--15 SEPTEMBER 1944,  
AMANVILLERS-VERNEVILLE ACTION (NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: COMPANY IN ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company G, 2d Infantry Regiment, 5th Division, 3d United States Army, in the first attempt of this regiment to capture the city of Metz. This action covers the move from the departure area in the vicinity of Buzy at 0830, 7 September, to the time Company G, 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, was relieved by the 90th Infantry Division at 0300 the night of 14-15 September 1944. (Contact was made with the enemy at approximately 1130, 7 September.)

In order to orient the reader properly, it will necessitate going back about six weeks to the breakthrough at St. Lo 25 July 1944 and at Avranches 31 July 1944.

As you well know, until this happened, the Allied Forces had been fighting a confined fight due to the restrictions of the hedgerow type of terrain so common throughout Normandy. Prior to this event, everyone had been saying, "Wait till we get to the open country." It seems breakthroughs at St. Lo and Avranches were just what everyone had been praying for.

Shortly after this happened, the 5th Infantry Division was transferred from the 1st U. S. Army and, together with the 35th Infantry Division and the 2d French Armored Division, formed the XX Corps. This Corps was to be the spearhead of the 3d U. S. Army. (1)

The mission of the 3d Army was to attack south-southwest, where if it could secure the Rennes-Fourgeres area, one Corps could turn west and capture the Brittany Peninsula, the other Corps to continue south to capture Mayenne. (2)

However, two problems faced the 3d Army at this time. One was to safeguard the 20-mile corridor made by the breakthrough, the other to exploit

(1) A-1, p. 9; (2) A-2, p. 1.

the breakthrough already accomplished. (3)

There was a fleeting but definite opportunity for a major victory. To do so, it would be necessary to capitalize on the breakthrough before the enemy could analyze the situation. To attempt this would entail moving one division about 120 miles to the Loire River in the vicinity of Nantes and Angers. In doing this it would be necessary not only to keep the corridor open, but be prepared to withstand counterattacks from the east. (4)

The decision was to exploit the breakthrough, for on 7 August 1944 the 5th Infantry Division was on the move and the race across France started - and a race it really was, for in approximately 28 days, after many sharp and decisive engagements with the enemy, the division had dashed 600 miles across France. (See map.)

The speed of this drive, the greatest sustained drive in military history to date, had its telling effect, for on the 28 August the gasoline supply started to run low and it had to be rationed. However, this action was ineffective and when the 5th Infantry Division closed in the assembly area around Verdun on about 31 August, it was literally out of gas. But 2000 gallons remained in the entire division for the operation of 1474 vehicles. It is readily understood why we were grounded.

The 5th Division was immobilized in this area from the 1 September to 6 September 1944. Men of the outfits were bivouacked in the same area through which the 5th Division had fought nearly 26 years before. Here many of the fathers of the men of our present army had been fighting while these very same sons were being born.

A reconnaissance force from the 6th Cavalry was reported to have entered Metz and found the city evacuated. Here was the golden opportunity to strike a quick blow at a disorganized enemy and crash through to the Rhine to attack the XX Corps final objective, Frankfurt, 160 miles to the east. The plan was to prevent reorganization of the enemy and the defense of either the Siegfried Line or the Rhine River. (5)

(3, 4) A-2, p. 1; (5) A-4.

But this was not to be, for here was a whole Corps of the mightiest and swiftest army ever mobilized held up by one of the oldest principles of war, "Never outrun your line of supply!"

From the 31 August to the 6 September the entire striking strength of the Corps was practically camped at the doorsteps of the ancient Fortress City of Metz.

In the drive across France the division had participated in the crossing of six rivers and by its quick and aggressive action prevented the enemy from setting up a defensive line able to resist the tremendous striking power of the XX Corps.

The swift pursuit was now at an end and for the next few months, it was a question of slugging it out with the enemy and gradually wearing him down until the second and final assault started 9 November 1944.

#### HISTORY OF METZ

Metz is one of the oldest and most fought over cities in Central Europe. It had been occupied and fortified by the Romans to protect their Empire from the Huns in the early centuries of Christianity. It had withstood all assaults by military forces since 451 A.D. (6)

Unfortunately for Metz, however, it had passed under the control of many kingdoms and governments through peace treaties. Metz remained practically independent under the protection of France until 1684 when it was made the capital of a Province of France. For almost 200 years Metz enjoyed peace, becoming an integral part of France. At least the French had this feeling, but in 1870, after the Franco-German War, Metz was ceded to Germany under whose control she remained until the end of World War I. Once again Metz became a part of the Republic of France, to remain so until the surrender of the French in 1940.

Each succeeding occupation by the warring forces wrought its changes in this great city by improving its tactical value until the city was ringed by 43 forts and fortified groups which improved the natural barriers. (7)

(6) A-1, p. 13; (7) A-3, p. 7.

These 43 forts and fortified groups were constructed in two belts of fortifications. The inner belt, consisting of 15 forts, was started in the 18th Century and completed in 1866 under Napoleon III. Until 1940 none of these forts ever mounted an artillery gun, and in the opinion of the French General Staff were valuable only as infantry outposts and observation posts.

The second and outer belt of forts was begun by the Germans in 1871. They were constructed as the rim of a wheel of hills, some six miles from Metz. These forts and fortified groups were primarily artillery positions, each one surrounded by a deep moat and protected by an inter-defensive system of interlocking fields of automatic weapons fire. (8)

#### GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES OF METZ

Metz is located on the dominating terrain of the Lorraine plateau formed by the swift, centuries old, current of the Moselle River and its tributaries, the Seille and Neid Rivers. The banks are dominated by high hills and ridges cut from these tributaries and are heavily wooded. All of these natural features tied in well and lent themselves to the strongest fortified area the Corps had encountered. This was the resistance encountered practically unknowingly, for the Germans after occupying Metz again in 1940 not only refortified the outer ring of forts but also the inner ring.

#### PLANNING AND RECONNAISSANCE STAGES

On the morning of 1 September 1944, acting on orders from General Patton, Lt General Walton Walker, Commanding General, XX Corps, directed his staff to prepare recommendations for plans for the next phase of the advance. However, due to the gasoline shortage previously described, practically no elements of the Corps were able to move. (9)

It was so bad that even General Gaffey, Chief of Staff, 3d Army, could not see the end of it for he said to General Walker, "I hope the situation will improve this afternoon, but until gas arrives, you will have to limit movement in your area." (10)

(8) A-3, p. 8; (9) A-3, p. 1; (10) A-3, p. 1.

The only unit able to move any distance in the whole area was the 3d Cavalry Group, due to being fortunate enough to have captured 4000 gallons of gasoline 30 August 1944. This unit made reconnaissance to the east and northeast in the directions of Metz and Thionville. (11)

It was imperative that the XX Corps units get moving again as the disorganized outfits of the German Army were withdrawing all along the sector using Metz as a rallying point. In addition to the regular garrison at Metz, there had been added the following organizations: the Fahnenjunkererschule (Officer Candidate School, Regiment VI), of which more will be said later; several battalions of the Stellung type formed into a regimental organization; and remnants of the 1010th Security Regiment and many straggler units. (12)

These were all incorporated into the 462d Mobilization Division and by 3 September 1944, this division was able to man the static defense of Metz, extending from Mondelange on the north to Ars-sur-Moselle on the south. The 17th S.S. Panzer Grenadier Division was assigned the defense of the southwest of Metz, and the 559th Infantry Division had instructions to delay southwest at Thionville and at Metz as long as possible. (13)

The whole strategy of delay was to gain as much time as possible to permit the organization of the center of the Western Front which was in danger of complete collapse. While the Germans were familiar with the opportunities presented, our troops had little realization of the enemy strength at Metz. Our troops had no information regarding the fortifications, nor did the maps in our possession at this time show any of the forts or fortified groups. (14)

On the 5 September sufficient gasoline was received to supply the 7th Armored and 5th Infantry Divisions. General Walker then issued Field Order No. 10 showing his intention to drive through Metz to the Rhine River. Time of attack for the 5th Division: 0800, 7 September 1944.

The reconnaissance phase was over and the Battle for Fortress Metz started, not to end until the 15 December 1944 when the final fort, Fort

(11, 12, 13) A-3, p. 2; (14) A-3, p. 2 and personal knowledge, self.



Jeanne de Arc, surrendered.

THE METZ OPERATION  
AMANVILLIERS--VERNEVILLE ACTION  
(Personal experience)

On the 6 September, the Battalion commanders of the 1st and 2d Battalions were summoned to the Regimental Command Post in the town of Buzy to receive the regimental order. The battalions, reinforced, would move out at 0830, 7 September 1944 - objective, the high ground overlooking Metz on the northwest. (15)

The 1st and 2d Battalions each having one platoon, Company A, 818th Tank Destroyer Battalion; one platoon, Company A, 7th Engineer Battalion; one platoon, Company A, 5th Medical Battalion; and one platoon of the Regimental Antitank Company attached, entrucked and moved out on schedule.

Company A, 735th Tank Battalion, was attached to the 2d Infantry but had not as yet reported.

The 1st Battalion was on the northern and the 2d Battalion on the southern route, and the 3d Battalion was in Corps Reserve. (16)

At approximately 1130, after passing through the town of Jouaville and just clearing the woods on the highway into Verneville, the leading elements of the 2d Battalion came under enemy fire. (17) The Intelligence and Reconnaissance Squad, operating forward of this battalion, reported enemy in the town about 1000 yards ahead. The battalion detrucked and F Company, which was the leading company, pushed out to the front and with G Company following, attempted to advance through the woods in an effort to get nearer the town to launch the attack, but the Germans would have none of this. They poured heavy artillery and mortar fire into the woods, forcing us to withdraw to our detrucking point.

G Company was ordered to attempt to make a flanking movement to the right and enter the town from the southeast. The company was able to move into the woods about 1000 yards before it came to a clearing of approximately 400 yards to the next wooded area. But directly up the open space between

(15) A-3, p. 2; (16) A-5, p. 37-38; (17) A-5, p. 38.

the two wooded areas, there was a small farm yard, laid out in the usual French manner. This was reported to the Battalion Commander, who ordered the Company Commander to send a strong patrol in to ascertain if it was occupied by the enemy.

The 1st Platoon, under Lt Marvin Shipp, crossed the open terrain and entered the woods on the far side. They then proceeded through the woods towards the farm.

No enemy was encountered, so the platoon started to move into the building area when they were taken under heavy small arms fire from a small wooded area to the left. This woods was surrounded by a stone wall, through which rifle embrasures had been cut. This was reported back to the Company Commander who requested direct fire be put on this location. This was done and after a few large holes had been blasted in the wall, the enemy withdrew from this position.

Lt Shipp and his platoon entered the farm yard only to find it deserted. The platoon had not occupied the position more than five minutes when heavy artillery and mortar fire started to fall in the yard. From the volume of fire the Germans must have thought a much larger force of Americans had entered the place.

The order was given to withdraw but the Germans prevented this by dropping heavy mortar fire between the farm yard and the woods, preventing the withdrawal. Due to Lt Shipp's excellent leadership and control, our casualties during this operation amounted to one and that was an accidental self-inflicted wound of a Browning automatic rifleman.

Later that evening, the remainder of the company moved from its location in the woods, across the open space to the farm yard joining the 1st Platoon. The company then moved to another wooded area further to the east to be prepared to attack the town from the northeast the next morning. Due to the thickness of the woods and the men carrying machine guns and mortars, it was past midnight when we arrived at the area from which we were to attack at 0700.

By this time a platoon of tanks from Company A, 735th Tank Battalion, joined the battalion and during the night moved up to join the company. Also, sometime during the night, two men took off without permission to return to the rear to obtain water. These two men were captured, but about two weeks later returned to the company.

At daybreak a limited visual reconnaissance was made, but before plans could be completed, the Germans shelled the woods very heavily with artillery and direct fire from 88's. About this time the Battalion Executive Officer came forward and said he had a mission for Company G, and for the Company Commander to turn the company over to the Executive Officer and come with him. As we started to move off the shelling became so severe it was necessary to withdraw from the area.

By this time a complete and definite plan had been conceived by the Battalion Commander and Company G was moved from the right flank to a wooded area on the left flank and ordered to prepare to attack the town of Verneville, assisted by a platoon of tanks: area of departure, the woods; direction of attack, northeast across approximately 600 yards of open rolling terrain. About 200 yards in front of the woods there was a rise or fold in the ground protecting them from direct observation of the enemy in the town.

An artillery preparation of 10 minutes duration would begin at 1655. Under cover of this preparation, the platoon of tanks would move out to the near slope of the rise mentioned above, and be prepared to attack the town with the infantry at 1705.

Cooperation between the artillery and infantry was excellent, but when the infantrymen reached the tanks, it was almost impossible to get them to move for they were completely buttoned up and we had no means of communications, except by banging on the turrets or sides of the vehicles, as at this time there were no outside phones on the tanks. A few minutes were lost getting them started, then the attack moved quickly towards the objective.

As the attack crossed the slope and moved toward the town, roughly 400 yards of open flat terrain faced us, criss-crossed by barbed wire pasture fences. The Germans opened up with small arms and mortar fire. From our right front but at a great distance from the town, we were receiving direct 88 fire. Later we found this fire was directed at the attacking troops by SP's from the fortified area of Flappeville.

On the left flank the attack, aided by a slight falling away of the ground affording a little cover, was moving along rapidly. On the right flank, it was slowed down by intense mortar fire. The platoon leader, Lt John Bennett, was actually pulling his platoon along with him, as he was up with the leading scouts. As he approached to within about 100 yards of the wall on this side of the town, the tanks in his sector stopped and started to withdraw, leaving Lt Bennett and his platoon without covering fire for the remainder of the distance into town. When this happened, a sniper behind the wall, firing through an embrasure, opened up, seriously wounding Lt Bennett. At this time the intensity of the mortar fire increased, compelling the men to keep moving in. The Platoon Sergeant and radio man went after the sniper, but before they killed him, he killed the radio man.

By the time aid could be gotten to Lt Bennett, he had been killed by mortar fire. (18)

The town was taken and cleared of the enemy by 1830 and outposting completed by 1900, 8 September. Much to our surprise no counterattack developed and no artillery fire bothered us. Our casualties were not too severe, but the loss of Lt Bennett was a real blow to the company as he was an excellent and experienced officer.

During the night K-rations and ammunition were brought up to the near side of the town and hand-carried to the far side as the streets had not as yet been swept for mines.

At 0300 on the night of 8-9 September, the enemy succeeded in infiltrating into C Company positions, along an abandoned railroad bed,

(18) From personal knowledge and statement by Platoon Sergeant.

to our front, inflicting several casualties. Immediately the men dug fox-holes and the position was secured for the night, or so we thought.

The kitchen force knowing our positions, prior to the move, had prepared a hot meal of roast beef, boiled potatoes, coffee, etc., which was to be the first hot meal in three days. But this order made it impossible to serve as a hot meal, so it was sent up in the form of sandwiches about 1200.

This food was being distributed when the Germans counterattacked in force between F and G Companies. The attack was made with plenty of automatic small arms, supported by machine gun and 20-mm fire. It was almost completely successful for it forced G Company back to its original positions in Champenois Farm and most of F Company from the hill. However, one platoon of that company, supported by a platoon of heavy machine guns from H Company, managed to hang on, and when the attack was over, the ground was strewn with a large number of enemy dead. The attack had been fierce and sudden, killing many of our men rolled up in their blankets.

Company G was reorganized and held in the farm building area. Late the next morning the Battalion Commander, Lt Colonel Leslie K. Ball, came forward and ordered the company to attack Montigny Farms, about 600 yards to our front, as it was decided the enemy was directing his operations from this position.

At approximately 1300, just prior to our jump-off, we received about nine replacements who were immediately assigned to platoons. This was a mistake for within a few hours, half of them were casualties.

The attack being made without the support of tanks moved out at 1330. It progressed about 400 yards when it received very heavy automatic fire from a small thicket and we suffered heavy casualties. This position was taken and the attack carried on towards Montigny Farms. Lt Shipp, on the left, managed to work his platoon just within the woods surrounding the buildings when he was badly wounded in both arms. At this time, Sgt Florian Malinski took over and, placing Lt Shipp in a covered position, attempted to carry on the attack. For this action, Sgt Malinski received the Silver Star Medal and later a battlefield commission for his outstanding leadership.

The right platoon, also commanded by a Sergeant, was pinned down and unable to advance. At this time the stubborn enemy again counterattacking, supported by artillery and mortars, forced the company to withdraw to Champenois Farm, leaving about 12 killed and bringing back twice as many wounded in addition to those who had already returned.

Some of these bodies were not recovered until three months later on the spot where they fell. (24)

During the time these attacks - the one on Hill 339 and the one on Montigny Farms - were going on, Champenois Farm was under continued harassing fire which was systematically destroying the buildings, causing many casualties and many cases of battle shock.

Colonel Ball, the Battalion Commander, came forward to the Company CP and after a conference, it was decided to abandon the position and pull back about 500 yards and dig in. The company was not only physically exhausted but also depleted in personnel. At this time G Company had only 3 officers, and the Battalion Commander took one who was completely exhausted and on the verge of battle fatigue back to the CP with him.

The next day, 12 September, was spent in improving these dug-in positions, and in dodging 88's. We continued to have casualties, not only wounded but also shell shock cases, from these crashing, smashing 88's.

At 1800, the Company Commander was directed to alert the company for a move and to meet the Battalion Commander at F Company forward CP. Upon arrival at this location he was briefed on the mission of F Company and told he was to accompany the Battalion Commander on a reconnaissance.

Darkness closed in quickly, limiting this reconnaissance to what could be observed by the light of a huge fire burning in the vicinity of Gavellotte some miles to our right flank. After wandering around, which is exactly what we did, for about 20 minutes, the party returned to G Company CP, a double-sized foxhole, and the Battalion Commander issued the order.

(24) Eye witness, self.

The plan was substantially as follows: one platoon was to move out about 300 yards to the right front of Champenois Farm, another platoon to be put in position on the forward slope on the left of Hill 339, about 250 yards in front of F Company. The third platoon was to take up positions relatively in between the other two platoons but about 200 yards to the rear. The Weapons Platoon, less the Machine Gun Section, was to remain in its position.

These positions had been selected by Higher Headquarters without a definite or visual knowledge of the terrain, and was so pointed out by the Company Commander, who was familiar with the terrain.

The position selected for the left flank platoon was in a large potato and beet patch. The Company Commander stated that due to the short time between moving in and daylight and the lack of camouflage material, any positions dug would stand out like sore thumbs. Any men placed in these positions would be absolutely cut off during daylight hours and could be reached only during hours of darkness.

The right flank position was none too desirable but at least that platoon would not be completely cut off during the day as F Company would be able to support them by fire from positions directly in rear and from positions in the woods to the right.

The Company Commander recommended that both forward platoons be placed within close contact with each other on the same flank of Hill 339, bent slightly back to the left, refusing this flank and covering the original position in the potato patch by fire.

This discussion was interrupted by a heavy artillery barrage lasting about 15 minutes.

Finally, when the Company Commander pointed out he had only one rifle platoon leader, who had no battle experience - having joined the company only a few hours before - the Weapons Platoon leader, and but 39 riflemen, his plan was approved.

This proved to be a lucky thing, for within less than an hour and before the move started, it was necessary to relieve the Weapons Platoon leader and send him to the rear due to battle fatigue, leaving only an untried platoon leader and the Company Commander. (25)

The move forward was made without incident but under uncomfortable conditions as a heavy rainstorm came up, cutting our visibility to almost zero.

The company arrived on the hill around 0100, 13 September, picked up engineering tools, picks and shovels at F Company's CP, and moved out to prepare its positions. Although it had not been mentioned before, this position was marked with many large shell holes which were improved and incorporated into our plans. This cut down considerably the amount of digging necessary permitting us to complete the work just before dawn. This was a break, for when daylight came we found we were in a fairly exposed position; in fact, in some positions the men could not move during daylight, and in order to relieve their physical needs, the K-ration boxes were used.

The 13 September was spent in relative quiet for G Company while F Company cleared the woods to the rear of small groups of enemy who had either been isolated or had infiltrated our positions during the night. (26)

The night of 13-14 September, reconnaissance patrols were sent out in an attempt to locate the enemy strong points in preparation for another attack on Montigny Farms in conjunction with the 3d Battalion.

Plans for this attack were being worked on during the 14 September, when word was received that a relief for the Second Combat Team was coming up. This was highly pleasing, not only because the troops were completely exhausted, but due to the need for replacements.

No time was allowed for the relieving Company Commanders or Platoon Leaders to come forward on reconnaissance. At approximately 0400 the night of 14-15 September 1944, Company G, 2d Infantry, was relieved by elements of the 2d Battalion, 359th Infantry, 90th Infantry Division, and moved back to battalion assembly area, preparatory to a motor movement of about 16 miles.

(25, 26) Eye witness, self.



When the company closed in this assembly area at 0700, only 2 officers and about 60 men were left of those who had started in this attack on 6 September 1944.

During the afternoon of 15 September, three officers, one transferred from Company H, two replacements with no combat experience, and approximately 110 men were sent to Company G and assigned to the platoons by the 1st Sergeant. It was necessary not only to appoint a new Executive Officer but new Platoon Sergeants and Squad Leaders as well. (27)

On the morning of the 16 September, the Company Commander was called to the Battalion CP to receive a warning order for an attack to be made that day. Here was a battalion being committed with almost 50 per cent replacements who had been with it less than 24 hours. The men didn't have time to know who their leaders were, or hardly what squad or platoon or company they were in.

Fortunately, however, within the hour the orders were cancelled and the 2d Battalion went into Corps Reserve, ending what the writer has called, "The First Battle for Metz".

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation it will be seen that the whole action would have been much different had sufficient information on the forts and fortified groups been available. Because of this deficiency, the 2d Infantry was assigned a frontage much too wide for it to operate effectively.

This lack of information naturally affected the preparations and decisions that had to be made.

While it is easy for a Company Commander who sees only his small part and not the big picture to criticize, nevertheless I feel the following criticisms of this operation can be made:

1st: The failure of the Communication Zone to maintain an adequate supply of gasoline even though we were advancing so rapidly. It was felt by many that Metz could have been taken early in September if our supplies had been continuous.

(27) Eye witness, self.

2d: The complacent attitude of our men who expected the Germans to continue fighting small delaying actions for a day and then pulling out, as they had been doing all across France.

3d: The failure to foresee that the enemy resistance would increase as we approached his borders.

4th: The zone of action assigned to the regiment was too large, approximately 5500 yards.

5th: The indecision and lack of plans were marked. At one time the three battalions were all committed, leaving no reserve capable of decisive action.

6th: The failure of G-2 Section to obtain intelligence and information regarding these fortifications and get it down to the men who needed it.

7th: Failure to relieve units so depleted in strength that they were incapable of striking an effective blow.

8th: The weakness of the replacement system. When a unit is depleted by 50 per cent or more, and given replacements to bring it up to strength, it cannot be expected to continue as an effective combat element the next day.

### LESSONS

Some of the lessons learned from this operation are:

1. An old lesson was reemphasized: Reconnaissance is a must. If a personal reconnaissance cannot be made, then at least it should be done by an intensive map study.
2. When the enemy is on the run and disorganized, he must not be given an opportunity to stop for reorganization, as he was by this break in our supply line.
3. Complete, accurate, and up-to-date G-2 reports must be sent down to the lowest echelon.
4. Do not give a unit a mission that will disperse it over such a broad front. The mission assigned must be capable of being accomplished.
5. A depleted unit cannot be brought up to strength over night and be expected to go back into combat with high morale and esprit de corps.

6. The enemy will always fight harder as the battlefield approaches  
his own country.

7. The effectiveness of a unit, no matter how powerful, depends upon  
the efficiency of its supply system. Never outrun your supply lines.